

Evelyn comes back inside, finished with the bumper, just a sticky patch where the sticker used to be. She freshens her mouth with blood-red lipstick, pats her dirty blonde bouffant, unbuttons the top button on her blouse, moves in for the kill.

SOMETIMES MARRIED GUYS GET PHONE CALLS LIKE THIS LATE AT NIGHT FROM THEIR UNMARRIED FRIENDS

Larry says he's laid up, had his feet operated on, six weeks convalescence, can't pay rent with no money coming in, so he's moved in with his brother Skip out in Victorville who turns out to be a weekend nudist but at least not a fag (he's pretty sure) but probably (almost certainly) a voyeur and maybe a pedophile.

Larry says the girls he's been meeting recently all have tattoos and smoke and look scuzzy and can't put a sentence together so, no, he probably (almost certainly) won't be getting married soon.

Larry says he might go to the colony with Skip because there are a lot of fifteen and sixteen and seventeen year old girls there, naked, and he doesn't think that that can be classified as pedophilia really, just a natural appreciation of feminine beauty at its peak.

PLUMBING PROBLEMS

The steady drip, drip, drip, of the faucet was getting on Ruth's nerves, so she got on Ellis, and Ellis, reluctantly, grabbed a crescent wrench and had a go at playing plumber.

The steady drip, drip, drip, became, within seconds, a soaring geyser. When Ruth stepped into the kitchen to check the progress, Ellis was attempting to stem the gushing water by stuffing his t-shirt into its source.

He wasn't succeeding.

Ruth ran out front and turned the water off. Then she threw a mop and bucket at Ellis and told him she should never have sent a boy to do a man's job.

Ellis bailed the excess water into the sink while Ruth worked on the faucet, and he picked up the debris that had floated out from under the refrigerator, most notably the

skeleton of a small kitten he'd brought home years ago. It had disappeared one night and he and Ruth had assumed that it had run off, or the coyotes had gotten him.

Ruth finished up as Ellis mopped the last of the mess. She told him to go out front and turn the water on, that something had finally been fixed right.

But she was wrong. The entire faucet came off the fixture with such force that it dug into the ceiling and stuck there, and the geyser roared like before, and Ruth bowled Ellis over on her way out front again, yelling back at him to get his dumb ass to the phone to call a damned plumber.

THE BOG MUMMY

Clete pushed through the bathroom door and was confronted by his naked, one-breasted mother-in-law sitting on the toilet. She let out a noise like a bleating goat and curled into a fetal position on top of the bowl, to hide the front of her body from him. She called him a son-of-a-bitch before he could get the door closed.

He clicked the door shut and leaned against the wall in the hallway, breathing hard, saying, "Oh Jesus." It hadn't been a pretty sight: she was a desiccated, wiry little woman, bald as an egg from the chemo, her wrinkled brown skin making her look like an extraterrestrial off the cover of one of those supermarket tabloids she was always buying.

He used the other bathroom and got out of the house before the old lady could tell his wife. He wheeled the lawn-mower out of the garage and started it up. When he was two swaths into it, Mom hobbled out the front door, wearing her bathrobe and her crow-black wig. Clete froze, holding tight to the roaring mower. She stepped out onto the lawn, hit him in the knee with her cane, called him a dirty pervert, and limped back into the house.

She died in her bed a week later. Clete's wife Juanita, her baby daughter, discovered her in the morning, as stiff and dry as an old bog mummy, in the fetal position again, wrapped in her blue flannel nightgown. Clete pulled his wailing wife from the bed and called 911.

The will specified cremation. She'd already paid for it. And a trip into eternal orbit. She'd already paid for that too: a company based in Florida, Eternal Orbits Inc. The company's brochure said they'd launch the dear departed with two hundred and ninety-nine other deceased souls in